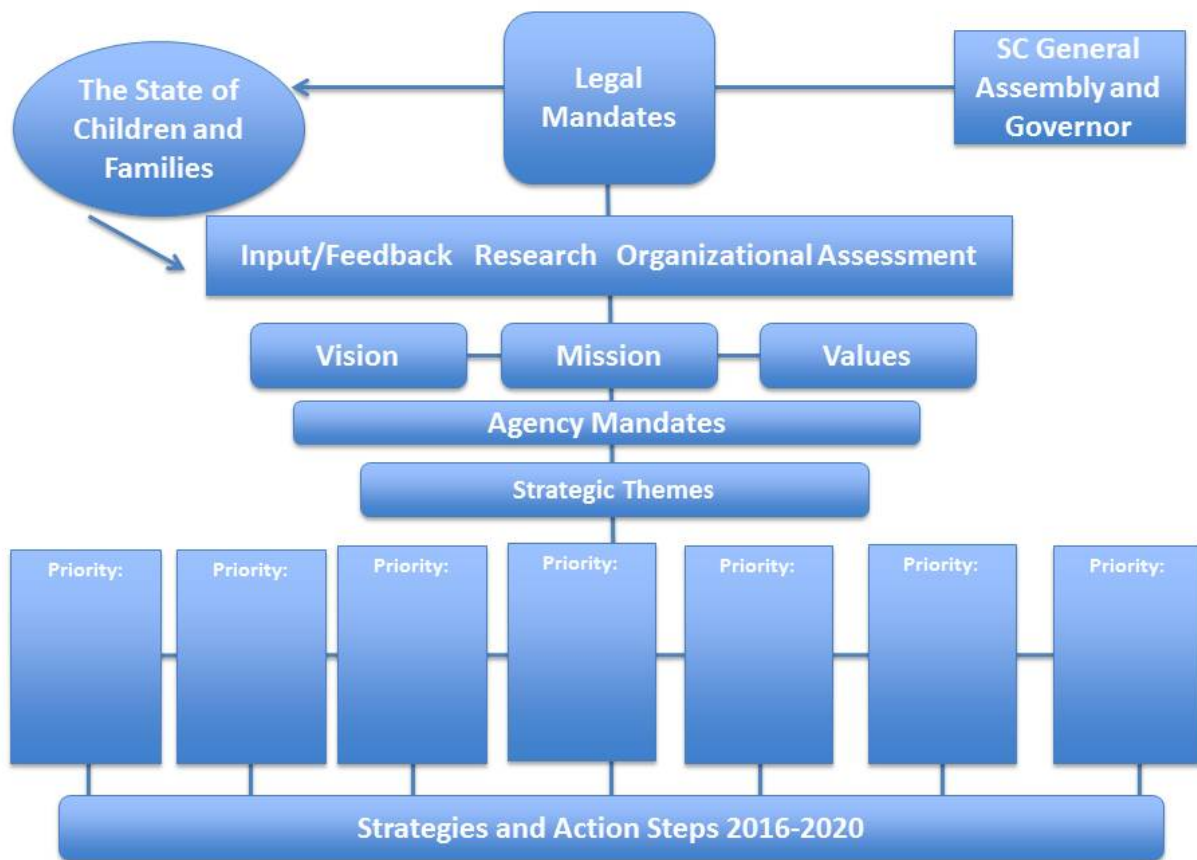


FIRST STEPS' STRATEGIC PLAN

VISION 2020

December 2015 - December 2020

Act 287 (enacted June 2014) requires that the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees develop a “comprehensive long-range initiative for improving early childhood development, increasing school readiness and literacy.” To develop its 2015-2020 plan, the board contracted with a team of external consultants to develop a process and support the work of the First Steps board, staff at state and local levels in developing a new strategic plan.



Strategic Planning Graphic, 2015, SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees

The resulting plan --*Vision 2020*-- contained herein, is the agency’s fourth strategic plan (*SC First Steps’ Implementation Plan, 2001; Blueprint for SC’s Children, 2004; Vision 2013, 2009*), with a focus on current needs of SC children and families, interagency coordination, and local infrastructure and assets. Trustees’ planning efforts were informed by a review of First Steps’ legal obligations, past evaluations, public input, county listening sessions, and current SC data.

The board's goal was to set forth bold priorities to best meet the obligations of Act 287, given state and local First Steps' organizational strengths and pressing needs of the Palmetto State.

BACKGROUND

Legal Authority of First Steps

Since the enabling legislation (June 1999) made South Carolina the third state in the country to establish a statewide early childhood initiative (following Smart Start, NC, 1993; and First 5, CA, 1998), First Steps has established a system of support for parents and communities in all 46 counties. Lawmakers in 1999 recognized that meaningful school readiness progress would require the same innovative spirit that powers private sector advances, therefore established First Steps as a public-private partnership, with a mandate to create a network of interconnected local partnerships statewide. State and local First Steps boards are leaders for children from both public and private sectors, committed to improving outcomes for South Carolina's youngest learners. Because no two communities are the same, each local First Steps board operates under common bylaws, with the same mission and goal, but has responsibility to develop systems, programs and services that meet the needs of families and children locally.

First Steps' legislative mandate has not changed since inception:

"The goals for South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness are to:

- (1) provide parents with access to the support they might seek and want to strengthen their families and to promote the optimal development of their preschool children;
- (2) increase comprehensive services so children have reduced risk for major physical, developmental, and learning problems;
- (3) promote high quality preschool programs that provide a healthy environment that will promote normal growth and development;
- (4) provide services so all children receive the protection, nutrition, and health care needed to thrive in the early years of life so they arrive at school ready to succeed; and
- (5) mobilize communities to focus efforts on providing enhanced services to support families and their young children so as to enable every child to reach school healthy and ready to succeed."

-Section 59-152-30 (1999, 2006, 2013, 2014)

In 2006, following the December 2015 *Abbeville v SC* ruling, the General Assembly reauthorized First Steps and added an important new legal obligation to the agency. In response to Judge Thomas Cooper's assertion that the education clause of the South Carolina Constitution "*imposes an obligation upon the General Assembly and the State of South Carolina to create an educational system that overcomes, to the extent that is educationally possible, the effects of poverty on the very young, to the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, to enable them to begin the educational process in a more equal fashion to those born outside of poverty* (p. 156-157, sec. 428)," lawmakers expanded South Carolina's four-year-old kindergarten program in two ways: (1) expanded 4K from half day to full day for eligible students; and (2) expanded 4K delivery from public-only to public-private, to increase access and choice for parents.

In 2010, by Executive Order, First Steps was charged with two additional legal mandates: (1) to serve as Lead Agency for BabyNet (*IDEA, Part C, 1998*) and (2) to serve as South Carolina's Early Childhood Advisory Council (*Head Start Reauthorization, 2007*). These two duties were codified in the 2014 Reauthorization (*Act 287, 2014*).

Evaluations of First Steps

Since 1999, First Steps has had four external evaluations to assess progress of the statewide system (*Child Trends, 2003; High Scope, 2006; High Scope, 2010; Compass, 2014*).

2003 Child Trends

This initial process evaluation noted the initiative's successful convening and startup as prescribed by state law and described SC First Steps as "ambitious," "innovative" and "engendering a culture of accountability."

2006 High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

In 2006, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation lauded First Steps for its ability to target and serve the "poorest of the poor and the neediest of the needy," and found "consistent evidence that enrollment in full-day 4K has positive effects on child outcomes, particularly during the kindergarten year." Unable to answer certain research questions, investigators identified a need to strengthen First Steps' data systems, develop fidelity guidelines and common statewide assessments – all changes implemented by the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees in 2007.

2010 High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

In 2010, High/Scope revisited the research questions of 2006 and lauded First Steps' improved data system and fidelity policies as a model for the nation. The report cited statistically significant improvements in parenting and child care quality. Researchers also noted universally positive reporting from teachers and parents participating in Countdown to Kindergarten. High Scope evidenced that students served in SC's private CDEPP 4K program achieved comparable achievement outcomes when compared to students served in public CDEPP 4K settings, at a lower cost to taxpayers.

2014 Compass Evaluation and Research

In 2014, Compass Evaluation and Research examined the question of whether First Steps is meeting its five statutory goals. Investigators concluded that the First Steps' public-private structure and model of shared governance generate a high degree of value-added benefits at both the state and local levels, that First Steps continues to successfully target and serve the state's most high risk children, and that the initiative has a statewide fiscal and programmatic accountability structure in place to guide and oversee local partnerships. Concluding that First Steps is meeting its legislative goals, researchers described the initiative as "the battery" powering many of the state's early childhood conversations and policies.

In addition to these legally-mandated evaluations, First Steps has been reviewed by the Legislative Audit Council (2011, 2013) and is currently under review by the SC House Oversight Committee and the First Steps Study Committee.

First Steps' Accountability and Act 287 Requirements

Each year, the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees reviews the results of each of the 46 local First Steps partnerships when making annual funding determinations. Since 2004, when the board began targeting services to at-risk children, and 2007, when the board added strong fidelity requirements to all prevalent programs, reviews of local county partnerships have included annual adherence to the following accountability criteria:

- **Client targeting requirements** (*SC Risk Factor Research, SC Office of Research and Statistics*)
- **Program accountability standards** (*SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees*)
- **Collaboration and operations requirements** (*SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees*)

In 2007, following the 2006 High Scope Evaluation, and in partnership with the Office of Research and Statistics, the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees amended its data collection system, to ensure statewide client-level information and results tracking for all prevalent programs. Innovative, evidence-informed programs may also be approved by the Trustees and are evaluated at the local partnership and funder level, as well as by the state board through the Evaluation Committee. The process for evaluating non-prevalent programs for consideration by the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees was developed by staff at the University of South Carolina, School of Education (2008).

In 2014, following reauthorization, the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees sought advice from the SC Attorney General to ensure compliance with new Act 287 requirements, and with the support of legal counsel, will be promulgating regulations for the continued implementation of the First Steps initiative (§ 63-11-1730(2)) related to local partnership grant qualifications (§ 63-11-1730(4)), the partnership funding formula (§ 63-11-1730(4)), results oriented measures and objectives (§ 63-11-1730(7)) and other associated issues of general public applicability that implement and prescribe law or policy.

In addition, Act 287 requires each local First Steps partnership to provide certain “core functions” within their communities by July 1, 2016. Plans are underway to support the local partnerships with these new legal responsibilities:

- “(a) service as a local portal connecting families of preschool children to community-based services they may need or desire to ensure the school readiness of their children;*
- (b) service as a community convener around the needs of preschool children and their families; and*
- (c) support of state-level school readiness priorities as determined by the State Board.”*

- Section 59-152-70 (A)(4)

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS and FINDINGS

The SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees, with input from external contractors, developed a process to guide its 2015 strategic planning efforts. The board committed to engaging the entire organization in the strategic planning process, reviewed background information, surveyed the citizens of South Carolina, current data and state-level needs to determine agency priorities and future plans. As information became available from other sources, staff and board members incorporated relevant information into the planning process (SC First Steps Study Committee, 2015; Southern Regional Education Board, 2015).



In addition, First Steps (via the agency heads on the state board and the Governor's Office) plans to review total public expenditures in early childhood for the state of South Carolina.

Input/Feedback, Research and Organizational Assessment

The board's input, research, and organizational assessment phase concluded in August 2015. The summary below provides key findings from each data team (*full team assessments are provided in the appendix*):

- 1) **Citizen Input Analysis** (*How Are the Children, May 2015, n= 908*)
 - a. Parents need more information about what helps children succeed
 - b. Parents need more access to high quality child care
 - c. 4K works, need help in earlier years

- 2) **Statewide Partner Input Analysis** (*County Listening Sessions, June-August 2015, n=404*)
 - a. Parent-home visitation and school transition programs are working
 - b. Increased school readiness outreach and education is needed
 - c. Increased child care technical assistance and scholarships are needed
 - d. Faith partnerships work, expansion here can reach more families
 - e. Community collaboration around school readiness data can be replicated
 - f. System improvements and more community technical assistance is needed

- 3) **State Partner Data Review and Analysis** (*DSS and Children's Trust data, August 2015*)
 - a. Child well-being metrics are at highest level in a decade, but systemic improvement is needed (*Annie Casey, KIDSCOUNT 2015*)

- b. Interagency collaboration should be increased to move well-being early childhood indicators: “It takes all of us working together”

In response to overwhelming public input related to child care access and quality as school readiness needs, a state-level, interagency team was assembled between First Steps and DSS key leaders. This team will continue its work into 2016, a progress report is included in the appendix of this report.

Values, Vision, Mission

Through a series of board conversations, review of legal obligations, current data and needs, the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees affirmed its vision, mission and values (June 2015).



First Steps' Vision:

Every South Carolina child will be prepared for success in school.

First Steps' Mission:

Collaborating with other entities, First Steps helps South Carolina families and caregivers prepare their children for school success by maximizing public and private community resources to deliver, enhance and expand high-quality early childhood services.

First Steps' Values:

- The years of early childhood are a critical window of development during which much of human potential is shaped.
- Families are the single most important influence on the development of their young children.
- The work of supporting families and caregivers is a collaborative effort between state and local stakeholders within the public, private and faith sectors.
- School readiness is the result of a child's development in many areas, with each contributing to the child's success.
- Services must be individualized and adaptable to meet the unique needs of children and families.
- We value, and demonstrate in our collaborative work and advocacy, diverse perspectives in the development of public policy and programs.
- To achieve desired results, services must be high-quality and grounded in strong evidence. First Steps operates within a culture of accountability.

AGENCY MANDATES

As First Steps prepares for its next five years, a synthesis of research findings and opportunities form the base of the *Vision 2020* plan, and undergird the board’s work to “develop a comprehensive, long-range initiative for improving school readiness within a culture of accountability [Section 59-152-32(A)].

These are stated in the form of imperatives or mandates for focus in all First Steps’ work, including the strategic plan.

- Uphold the role of parents as children’s first and primary teachers (Act 287, 2014)
- Strengthen early childhood partnerships with the private sector (Act 287, 2014)
- Increase interagency collaboration, integrated policies and programs (LAC, 2013; SREB, 2015)
- Focus on childhood health and wellness, comprehensive services (Act 287, 2014)
- Support and strengthen local partnerships (LAC, 2013)
- Build community capacity and program quality (COMPASS, 2014; SREB, 2015)
- Integrate literacy and appropriate formative assessment in early childhood services (READ TO SUCCEED, 2014)

STRATEGIC THEMES AND PRIORITIES 2015-2020

Through examination of Act 287, current regional and state-level research on the needs of families and children, partner input and analysis, through the lens of First Steps’ vision, mission, and values, and in consideration of noted agency mandates, the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees sets forth the following strategic themes and priorities for 2015-2020. In addition to meeting all of its explicit legal mandates, and in order to achieve its mission, vision, and values, *First Steps will specifically focus on three strategic themes statewide through 2020:*

- A. INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS and RESOURCES**
- B. ENHANCE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT and CAPACITY BUILDING**
- C. STRENGTHEN INTERAGENCY ACCOUNTABILITY and PUBLIC-PRIVATE COLLABORATION**



A. INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS and RESOURCES

Research is clear. Quality early experiences can make a lasting difference for a child's lifetime. South Carolina's early childhood infrastructure and leadership are well-positioned to allow for increased access to services 2015-2020.

✚ Priorities 2015-2020

- **Further expand access to high-quality early care, education, and early literacy services, particularly in the Abbeville plaintiff communities.**
 - Fully implement the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership model in participating communities (DSS, Head Start, child care community).
 - Increase access and quality child care, parent support, and school transition programs statewide (parent and child care partners, Kindergarten teachers).
 - Fully implement quality enhancement program with child care 4K partners and First Steps partnerships.

- **Enhance comprehensive services to children 0-5 and the families/caregivers who support them, recognizing families as the first and best teachers of their children.**
 - Increase access to parent home visitation, group support, literacy supports for child development and reading (SC Library, book and literacy models, home visitation models).
 - Increase technology solutions and direct communication to parents on ways they can help their children (Text4Baby, I CAN, medical, faith homes)

- **Increase understanding of school readiness domains and assessment, and “what works” to help young children succeed. Make information easily accessible in all communities and for all families.**
 - “I CAN” public information campaign- mobilize every SC citizen on what THEY can do for children – TV, radio, billboards, churches, etc. (ETV, EdVenture, Talk to Me, leaders statewide, SC Radio Network, social media).
 - Provide communities with annual readiness assessment training, data and technical assistance to develop community solutions, leveraging local assets (SDE, school districts, local partners determined by partnership boards)

B. ENHANCE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT and CAPACITY BUILDING

To ensure investments and early childhood quality are maximized, South Carolina needs to invest in system-wide capacity building and leadership development, building on SC's new readiness definition and best practices research. Teachers, parents, advocates, interventionists, home visitors, child care leaders, and volunteers will all benefit from intentional, ongoing training and development during 2015-2020.

Priorities 2015-2020

- **Build state and local capacity by strengthening interagency collaboration, public-private partnerships, strengthening technical assistance and leadership development for early childhood partners statewide.**
 - Complete DSS-FS interagency planning effort to make child care roles more effective and efficient (DSS, FS).
 - Provide updated leadership development and technical assistance to local partnerships (SCANPO, education partners).
 - Actively engage the faith community in early childhood interventions, parent and child mentoring (LARCUM, current faith partners).
 - Utilize expertise among higher education/education partners to strengthen SC's early childhood workforce capacity for working with children in poverty; annual professional development for 4K teachers, home visitors, early interventionists, local boards (FMU, SDE others).

- **Enhance systems of support for local partnerships, BabyNet providers, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership and 4K families.**
 - Complete restructure of technical assistance and training system to support local early childhood systems and prepare for new legal duties by July 2016.
 - Embed training on early literacy, readiness assessment and readiness domains in technical assistance system (10-state Kindergarten Entry Assessment cohort, state and regional early childhood partners).
 - Update all First Steps readiness outreach and education collateral for use by local partnerships (communications partners).
 - Implement 4K quality enhancement program with a focus on director and teacher development. Support QRIS system by providing on-site technical assistance and mentoring to child care providers, using Quality Counts, Centers of Excellence and First Steps 4K mentoring and professional development successes as benchmarks (DSS, SDE, McCormick Center).

C. STRENGTHEN INTERAGENCY ACCOUNTABILITY and PUBLIC-PRIVATE COLLABORATION

Act 287 of 2014 strengthened South Carolina's early childhood system by placing all child-serving agency heads on the state First Steps board and adding key early childhood leaders to the appointed governing body. Coordinated interagency planning is the focus of activities for 2015-2020.

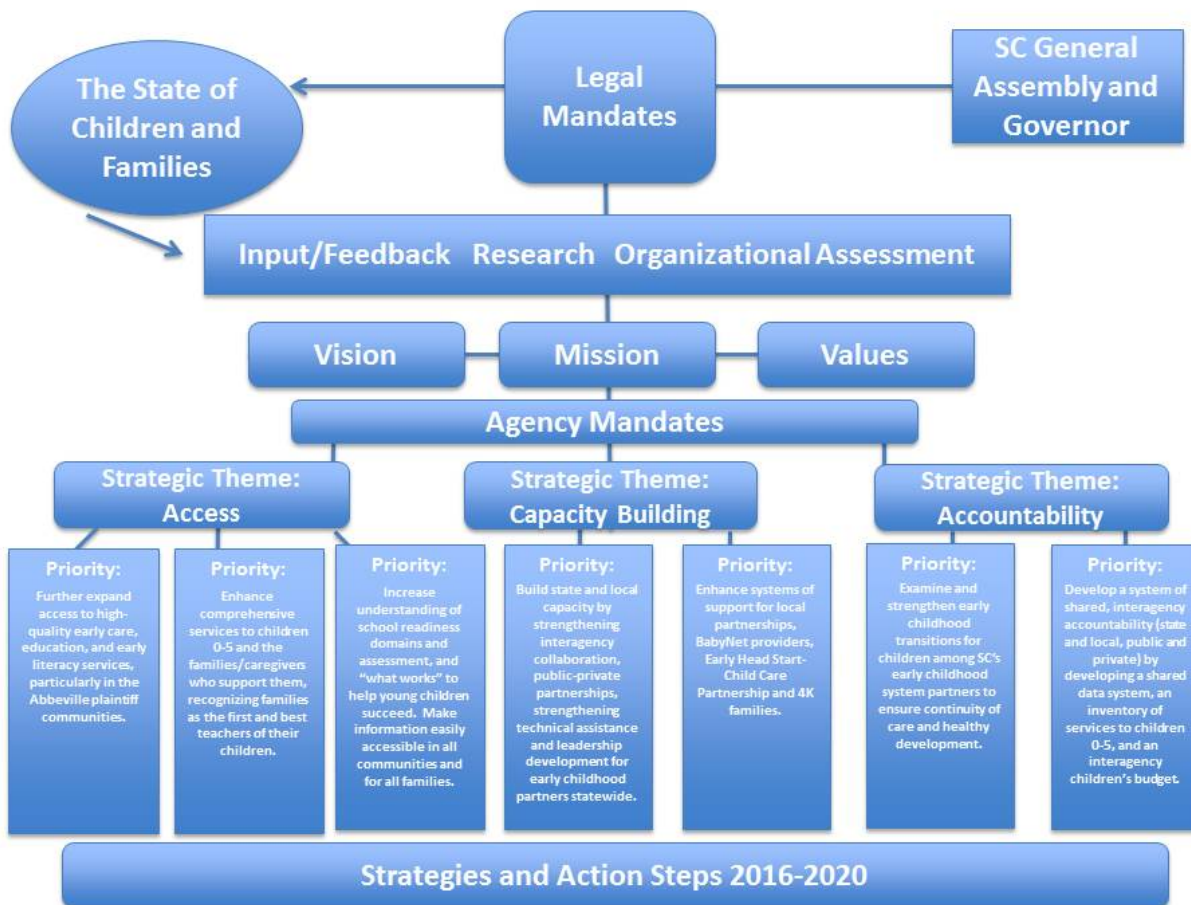
Priorities 2015-2020

- **Examine and strengthen early childhood transitions for children among SC's early childhood system partners to ensure continuity of care and healthy development.**

- Complete revision of BabyNet system and retrain personnel (OSEP, state agency partners, private interventionists)
- Identify system gaps, funding opportunities, and recommend solutions in the following program transitions:
 - Early Head Start- 4K (Head Start, FS, SDE)
 - Part C- Part B (FS, DDSN, SDE)
 - 4K to 5K (FS, SDE, schools, child care partners)
 - Home visitors - Schools (FS, local partners, PAT, NFP, ESSS, Children's Trust)

➤ **Develop a system of shared, interagency accountability (state and local, public and private) by developing a shared data system, an inventory of services to children 0-5, and an interagency children's budget.**

- Identify areas of shared expertise among agency partners and develop plans for coordination (i.e., 4K teacher training, child care mentoring)
- Develop interagency early childhood system improvement plan by 2018 (SCFS board)



NEXT STEPS

During 2016, the SC First Steps board and staff will operationalize plans, desired results for each of the seven strategic priorities. Standing board committees will oversee the work as appropriate, with the possibility that ad-hoc committees of the board may be created at the request of the Chair.

SUMMARY

South Carolina is a national leader in the early childhood arena.

Beginning in 1984, as one of the first states to invest in prekindergarten for 4-year-olds, through 2014 with the reform and reauthorization of First Steps and the passage of Read to Succeed, the Palmetto State has made the development of public-private partnerships for early learning a priority. The SC First Steps Board of Trustees is a robust governing body tasked with interagency school readiness planning and program implementation, though local partnership boards embedded in all 46 counties. To see the promise of this public-private partnership, the board stands ready to further develop and oversee the plan to increase access to services, redouble leadership development for the early childhood workforce, and realize the promise of full interagency accountability through 2020.

APPENDICES

How Are the Children? Summary

2015 Site Visits Summary

KIDS COUNT Summary

SC Department of Social Services-SC First Steps 2016 Interagency Progress Report

SREB Executive Summary